



The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
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No. 93

AUGUST 6TH, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

The Supplements on "The Predicament of Society and the Way Out" (C.N.-L. Nos. 86 and 88) have produced a stimulating correspondence. Criticism has been directed in the main to what I said about the need for a social philosophy. There are plainly in this region questions which need to be clarified. In the current number of *Christendom* Miss Ruth Kenyon expresses the opinion that the discussions following the Malvern Conference have shown that our ideas about the relation of Christianity to politics are at present even more inchoate and confused than our ideas about the relation of Christianity to economics. To help us through these difficulties we shall need the help of many able minds. I shall try in this letter to state afresh what I believe to be the crucial question confronting contemporary society.

A LETTER FROM DR. KARL BARTH

What I want to say links up with a challenging letter from Professor Karl Barth to Christians in Great Britain, which has just been published in the C.N.-L. Books series.¹ The core of what Barth says is this. He is certain that it is impossible for us as Christians to say "No" to this war, or even, "Yes and No"; we can only say "Yes." The reason, he explains, why we can speak with such certainty is that Jesus Christ rose from the dead and reigns from heaven over this world in its entirety. The world is, therefore, not a place where evil spirits may run riot and break all bounds. Christ is their victor and Christians have in His name to offer them a resolute resistance. This means that they must support the State when, in fulfilment of its divinely appointed task, it seeks to curb these forces of disorder and barbarism. But in spite of his admiration for our determined resistance to the powers of evil, Barth is a little perturbed about the ground on which British Christians offer that resistance. He is not sure that we understand that for Christians the only valid reason for resistance is obedience to the authority of Christ. He wonders whether we may not be basing our resistance on secondary and insecure reasons, such as the defence of liberty, of social justice and of the value of the individual. If this brief summary puzzles you, or provokes violent disagreement, you must go to Barth's volume for a fuller explanation of his position.

You will not expect me to embark in the News-Letter on a discussion of Barth's theology. But what he says about the State in his present letter and elsewhere (e.g. in his Gifford Lectures to which a reference was made in C.N.-L. No. 71) is a good line of approach to the question I want to open up in this letter. Barth makes two assertions about the State. First, that it is subject, like the whole of life, to the ultimate authority of Christ. Secondly, that it has a function to fulfil distinct from that of the Church, and in no way to be confused with the latter. In so far as human life is not controlled by faith and love, the State exists to set bounds to evil, to restrain wrong-doing by the exercise of force and thereby to save society from falling into chaos. What we have to expect from the State is simply that it should do properly its own job of maintaining outward freedom,

¹ *A Letter to Great Britain from Switzerland*, Sheldon Press, 1s. 6d.

justice and peace. The test is an objective one—whether the particular task entrusted to the State by God is well or badly done. A government of professing Christians may be a bad government and a government of non-Christians may be a good government.

THE NEED FOR A DOCTRINE OF SOCIETY

But our fundamental problems to-day arise not primarily from the State, as it has existed in the past, but (as I tried to show in the Supplements) from a totalitarian *society*. It has just been said of the State that it has a function to fulfil in relation to the natural order of human life, and that it has to be judged by its faithfulness in the fulfilment of this task rather than by its supposedly "Christian" character. Similarly we may say in regard to society that the ends which it collectively pursues, and the forms of its organisation, may either be such as leave scope for the development of man's real nature, and to this extent accord with God's purpose in creating man, or, alternatively, such as repress and pervert human nature. God made us men before He called us to be Christians. Loyalty to God requires us to defend men's humanity against forces which threaten to destroy it. It is the fundamental conditions of our existence as men that are threatened by modern totalitarian tendencies. Barth insists that National-Socialism is so contrary to God's purpose that we must resist it, if need be, by force of arms. Yes, but we have to face not merely an external danger but also insidious attacks from within. If the four freedoms, of which President Roosevelt spoke, are taken from us, what is left of the human person? Man is no longer a responsible being to whom God can speak and whom He can call to a life of fellowship and service.

If the great danger to-day is a threat to man's humanity, the Church has a double task. It has both to fulfil its evangelical task of declaring the Gospel of *redemption*—which it needs to do with far greater prophetic power than it does to-day—and also at the same time to bear an unflinching witness to the truth of God's purpose in *creation*, and to fight with all its strength against what is contrary to that purpose. Only when we see that these are different tasks, and that both are necessary, can we make the right response to the contemporary situation.

The second task has to be fulfilled in the secular and political sphere. It has to be undertaken, in co-operation with non-Christians. National-Socialism and Communism are political and social systems. The alternative to them is not a religion but a social and political system that does greater justice to the truth of man's nature. This alternative form of society will, like them, be an embodiment of man's earthly, temporal life. It will not, any more than they, be the sphere of the Church, nor the realisation of the Kingdom of God. But it will be a society which, unlike totalitarianism, acknowledges in some measure the true ends of human living. It may be a society leavened to an indefinite extent by Christian insights and standards. It will be a society in which it is possible for men to live a Christian life.

Barth tells us that resistance to National-Socialism is a duty of the *Church*—an act of obedience to Christ. If that is true, we must resist equally the forces in our own society making for a secular totalitarianism. If there is to be resistance, it must be effective resistance. And for effective resistance it is necessary to oppose to the totalitarian conception of society an alternative political and social doctrine—a national social faith, which can be taught in our schools and propagated by the press, as the Nazi creed is taught and propagated. I do not mean blue-prints of a Utopia; I mean a conception of society which accords with the true nature of man and purpose of his existence and embodies values which determine our action here and now.

Barth is very insistent in the letter which has just been published that we do not base our opposition to totalitarianism on any doctrine of Natural Law, that is on any set of principles deriving their authority from some other source than the Christian revelation. If he means that for the Christian there is no authority existing independently of Christ,

and that the ultimate source of our knowledge of the true purposes of man and society is the revelation in Christ, we can agree. But granting this, it is still of vital importance to see clearly that God has a purpose for man as man, as well as for man as Christian. In the difference between a totalitarian society, which denies, and a humane, liberal society, which acknowledges, the worth, freedom and responsibility of the human person, essential Christian interests are at stake. It is possible to say of society what was said of the State, that a society of professing Christians may be an unsound society, mistaking the true ends of man's temporal existence, and that a society of non-Christians may be, relatively speaking, a healthy, natural society.

It is of the utmost importance to distinguish clearly the two tasks which the Church is called to fulfil in the contemporary situation. It will save us from loose talk and indolent thinking about a "Christian" order of society, in which the fundamental difference between the sphere of the Church and the sphere of society is blurred, and the hard realities of political and economic life are not faced. It is only when we have clearly distinguished these two responsibilities of the Church in regard to the order of creation and the order of redemption—in regard to man as man as well as to man as sinner—that we become aware of the profound significance of the fact that in the stage which society has reached to-day there is a point at which these two responsibilities meet. That point is resistance to secular totalitarianism. If this conclusion is true, it is of the highest historical importance.

It means that we are facing an issue in which more is involved than what has always been recognised to be the duty of the Christian to serve God in the political sphere. Normally, in politics the Christian has to make his judgments and decisions on his individual responsibility. He does not claim that all Christians must necessarily agree with him. He draws a distinction between his personal judgment and the judgment of the Church. But in the struggle with a secular totalitarianism the substance of the Christian faith is at stake. At this point a fundamental political issue becomes a religious issue. If it is our *Christian* duty to resist Nazism by arms, it is our *Christian* duty to define, work for and establish a form of society which is consistent with God's purpose in the creation of man. In the fulfilment of this duty there will, of course, arise a multitude of particular issues about which Christians may quite properly judge differently. But behind all these particular issues there lies a fundamental decision in which all that Christianity stands for is at stake.

THE SPIRIT OF RUSSIA

We were told a fortnight ago by a Russian correspondent that Soviet Russia lives to a great extent on Russia's past, and that there is a movement to rehabilitate Russian history and culture, including its religious elements. In face of the unfathomable spiritual possibilities of the linking of our destinies with those of the Russian people it is worth while to recall a great utterance of one of Russia's greatest sons. The speech which Dostoevsky made in 1880 on the poet Pushkin was held at the time to be a political event of the first importance. It is the speech of an ardent lover of his country. Love sometimes sees qualities that are hidden from duller eyes and, notwithstanding all that has happened since, it will reward us to read again Dostoevsky's dream of Russia's spiritual destiny. The significance of Pushkin in Dostoevsky's eyes was his unique capacity for universal sympathy. In this he expressed prophetically the Russian national spirit in its aspiration after the final goal of universality. The reforms of Peter the Great had undoubtedly a utilitarian purpose, but linked with them was the presentiment of an incomparably higher goal. The people felt it directly and quite vitally.

"Surely we then turned at once," Dostoevsky continues, "to the most vital reunion, to the unity of all mankind ! Not in a spirit of enmity (as one might have thought it would have been), but in friendliness and perfect love, we received into our soul the geniuses of foreign nations, all

alike without preference of race, able by instinct from almost the very first step to discern, to discount distinctions, to excuse and reconcile them, and therein we already showed our readiness and inclination, which had only just become manifest to ourselves, for a common and universal union with all the races of the great Aryan family. Yes, beyond all doubt, the destiny of a Russian is pan-European and universal. To become a true Russian, to become a Russian fully (in the end of all, I repeat) means only to become the brother of all men, to become, if you will, a universal man. . . . To a true Russian, Europe and the destiny of all the mighty Aryan family is as dear as Russia herself, as the destiny of his own native country, because our destiny is universality, won not by the sword, but by the strength of brotherhood and our fraternal aspiration to reunite mankind. . . . In course of time I believe that we—not we, of course, but our children to come—will all without exception understand that to be a true Russian does indeed mean to aspire finally to reconcile the contradictions of Europe, to show the end of European yearning in our Russian soul, omni-human and all-uniting, to include within our soul by brotherly love all our brethren, and at last, it may be, to pronounce the final Word of the great general harmony, of the final brotherly communion of all nations in accordance with the law of the Gospel of Christ. I know, I know too well, that my words may appear ecstatic, exaggerated and fantastic. Let them be so, I do not repent having uttered them. They ought to be uttered, above all now, at the moment that we honour our great genius who by his artistic power embodied this idea. The idea has been expressed many times before. I say nothing new. But chiefly it will appear presumptuous. ‘Is this our destiny, the destiny of our poor, brutal land? Are we predestined among mankind to utter the new word?’

“Do I speak of economic glory, of the glory of the sword or of science? I speak only of the brotherhood of man; I say that to this universal, omni-human union the heart of Russia, perhaps more than all other nations, is chiefly predestined; I see its traces in our history, our men of genius, in the artistic genius of Pushkin. Let our country be poor, but this poor land ‘Christ traversed with blessing, in the garb of a serf.’ Why then should we not contain His final word? Was not He Himself born in a manger? I say again, we at least can already point to Pushkin, to the universality and omni-humanity of his genius. He surely could contain the genius of foreign lands in his soul as his own. In art at least, in artistic creation, he undeniably revealed this universality of the aspiration of the Russian spirit, and therein is a great promise. If our thought is a dream, then in Pushkin at least this dream has solid foundation.”

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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